

BEWARE OF CHURCH ASSOCIATIONS

January 18, 1997 (Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org) -

The following article, Beware of Church Associations: They Can Lead to Apostasy," is by Bill Jackson --

The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my Church." In Matthew 18:17, He indicated that this Church would be identifiable and visible. In Matthew 20:25, He gave definite commands concerning the government of this Church. It was not to be fashioned after the Gentile powers that had great men ruling over numbers of people.

From these scriptures we can learn a great deal about the Church. It is His Church; it is locally manifested; it is not to be ruled over by an outside authority. In the Book of Acts, the end result of Evangelism was the establishment of a local Church, and never do we read of any authority that abrogated the Lordship of Christ in the local Church.

In 1 Timothy 3:15, the local Church is referred to as "The house of God... the pillar and ground of the truth." This was not speaking of the structure made with bricks and mortar--this was the local Church, men and women called out from the world for the express purpose of representing God before men, angels and demons.

Today if you were to ask, "Where is the church?" you would be directed to a building. While God made no provision for any authority between the local church and Himself, we talk of the Methodist Church or the Episcopal Church and often mean a denominational organization. This is not scriptural terminology.

Where did it start to go wrong? Can it be that many of the problems we face today with ecumenism are rooted in the wrong concept of the church?

Both Paul (Acts 20:29) and Peter (2 Peter 2:1) prophesied that false teachers would attack the church. One false teaching was put forward by Irenaeus in the second century. He proposed the concept of a monarchical bishop as a safeguard against heresy. Regardless of the logic in this, it was in direct disobedience to the words of Christ (Matthew 20:25) and became an affront to His Lordship. As the system developed, the Lord Christ was supplanted by the Lord Bishop. Peter had warned about this (I Peter 5:3).

This concept of hierarchy (rule by priests) developed into the present Roman Catholic system of pope-cardinal-bishop-priest-people. This bars the local congregation from access to God and subjects each individual to priestly control, robbing him of the believer-priesthood that would be his if he rejected the works-grace mixture of Romanism and put his trust in the perfect Saviour from sin and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Reformation corrected many doctrinal problems, especially concerning Justification by Faith alone, but, while affirming the priesthood of believers, they still continued in a church government that seemed totally oblivious to the unique position of the local church. Leaders over groups of local churches appeared, archbishops, bishops, superintendents or moderators. As this leadership became self-propagating, men were loathe to give up the power and prestige that was theirs as denominational leaders, and the term "ministry" tended toward lordship over the flock rather than its true meaning of service to the other members of the body.

As reformation and revival movements surged and ebbed over the next few hundred years, while doctrinal purity was often sought, unscriptural government procedures persisted. Denominations were inevitable because new groups had distinctives that separated them from others, but, rather than use the Bible pattern of local church autonomy [independence], human leaders soon enthroned themselves or were enthroned in positions of authority over local churches in their denomination.

Many of the problems we face today are products of these unscriptural concepts of church and church government. From the biblical pattern where the Lordship of Christ is asserted over the local church, we have abrogated His Lordship and have adopted a structure more in tune with humanistic patterns of government.

This institutional structure is, by virtue of its form and disobedience, one that can be and has been invaded by Satan, resulting in a totally disgraceful doctrinal disobedience and ecumenical compromise. It can only be said that "This church" of whatever denomination is not "His Church."

Let us observe one Christian--Mr. X. He is a truly converted man, cleansed by the blood of Christ. This Christian joins a local church--a church that admits only born again believers to the fellowship and where the Lordship of Christ is a reality. One Sunday an outsider comes into the meeting and gives a talk on the necessity of all Christian churches getting together in one organization. He speaks of love and Christian co-operation. The believers had always had good fellowship with Christians in nearby towns, but the stranger tells them they would have more impact on the world if they united with others, and that they should form a board from all the churches to co-ordinate all the activities. This sounds like a good idea, so the like-minded churches get together, and a board is formed.

A Superintendent is elected--not a mean, hard dictator, but a loving man who insists that all he wishes to do is to help the local churches. As the structure gets more involved, it begins to control the missionary activities of the local churches and then establishes theological schools to train future ministers. Many of the very fundamental churches in this group continue their evangelism and growth locally, and do not pay much attention to what is going on at Headquarters. They do not realise that, over the years, some men who are not sound in the doctrines of the faith come into positions of authority on the board.

We can look into one of these churches and see our Christian, Mr. X. He is still a Christian, but he is disturbed when he reads that one of the professors at a school run by his group has written a paper denying the deity of Christ. But, after all, he assures himself, this doesn't effect me. I'm still a Christian and my church is still preaching the Gospel.

Several years pass. A young man, Mr. Y., from one of the churches, goes to Bible college to train for the ministry. There he is influenced by the professors who do not believe the deity of Christ and other doctrines of the Word of God. Mr. Y. begins to espouse some of these liberal teachings.

Some years later, the pastor at Mr. X's church dies and a replacement is sought. The denomination has by now secured control of the church property, and the church is told that they must find a pastor who is approved by their board. By now a number of men on the board are theologically unsound.

A young preacher, Mr. Y., comes to the church as a candidate. He doesn't say much about his beliefs about the Lord Jesus Christ and the Bible, but, it is thought that he must be sound because he comes from one of "our" colleges. Mr. X had thought that he might question him on some theological issues, but the others reprimanded him for being too narrow. Mr. Y. has a pleasing personality and preaches a good sermon and he is called to the pastorate.

Mr. X. now attends a church where the minister is unsure about the deity of Christ. Evangelism gives way to ecumenism and there is no more real Bible teaching the way there used to be. Mr. X. has allowed himself to become accustomed to the false things in his association of churches, and over the years his soul has become dry and he often yearns for the good old days when the Gospel was preached and Jesus was truly lifted up as Lord.

What should Mr. X. do? It is easy to see that he should leave his church and find an assembly where Jesus is glorified (even if he doesn't agree on all the finer points of doctrine). But to face the issue more precisely, when should Mr. X. have left his church? Since the issue is the Lordship of Christ, he should have left the church when this was abrogated, which would have been the first instance when unscriptural control was exercised on the local church. Any authority between the local church and the Lord Jesus Christ is unbiblical.

Those of us who take a stand against the ecumenical movement and the WCC do well to deplore the Christ-rejecting positions and unbiblical political thrusts. However, the WCC in its present formation could only exist as an amalgamation of unscriptural denominations. If we want to get to the root of the problem, we must see the ecumenical movement unfolding from the point where the Lordship of Christ is rejected in favour of a hierarchical control. When the bishop (or Superintendent or Moderator or General Secretary) is enthroned, Christ is dethroned and only disaster can be the result.

Purity must not only be in our fundamental theology; our ecclesiology (church concepts) must also be scriptural--the autonomous church, comprised only of Christians with Christ as their Lord, giving testimony to this world of the Lord Jesus Christ. Any other position is a step towards the Irenaeus heresy of hierarchical control, which is plain disobedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Head of the Church.

O TIMOTHY EDITOR'S NOTE: One clear example of the truth of what Brother Jackson has said about the local church is seen in the existence of the World Council of Churches. He mentioned this, but I would like to reinforce what he has said with a few other observations. It would not be possible for the apostate World Council of Churches to exist if there were no denominational and associational structures set up over the churches. In organizational structure and overall workings, such ecumenical groups as the World Council of Churches do not deal directly with the leaders and people of local assemblies, but with the headquarters and leaders of denominations.

I have in hand a copy of the World Council of Churches September 1984 edition of their booklet entitled MEMBER CHURCHES. But when I open and look through this list I do not find local churches. The World Council booklet is misnamed because there are no member "churches" listed therein. What we find, instead, are associations and denominational groups--Japanese Orthodox Church, Korean Methodist Church, Church of Pakistan, United Presbyterian Church of Pakistan, United Church of Christ in the Philippines, Church of Ceylon, Church of Christ in Thailand, Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, Church of North India, Church of South India, United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India, Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Methodist Church in India, Samavesam of Telugu Baptist Churches, etc. These are not New Testament churches; they are man-made denominations.

Oftentimes the people and leaders of the local assemblies even within the denominations and associations of churches do not agree with the beliefs and practices of the World Council of Churches. In fact, many times the local assemblies do not even agree with the beliefs and practices of the leaders of their own denominations or associations. And yet for many reasons these local assemblies have elected to give Christ's place as the Head of the Church over to a denominational headquarters, a regional General Secretary, etc.

If the churches would follow the Word of God and the pattern set forth so clearly by Christ and His Apostles in the first century, there would be no denominational or associational headquarters, there would be no national "churches," there would be no regional associations such as the Church of South India. If this were the case, and nothing existed apart from the churches, each one carrying out its own affairs under the direction of the Holy Spirit and Christ, its Head, it would be impossible for the heretical leaders of ecumenical groups like the World Council of Churches to operate. They would be forced to approach each church individually and deal with each church individually and be directly and immediately answerable to each

church individually. Even in our day of deep apostasy, it would not be possible for the National and World Councils of Churches to operate under such conditions.

It can be seen, therefore, why ecumenical leaders are so concerned that regional and national associations and fellowships be established. It is through these organizations set up apart from the churches that the ecumenists do their dirty work and get their feet into the doors of the assemblies.

Brethren, beware of allowing the New Testament assembly to be placed under the direction of any outside authority or headquarters. And beware of setting up anything which will eventually lead to the formation of such a headquarters. Remember that apostasy begins with small, seemingly insignificant things and then grows as leaven and as a canker.

"Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6).